In contemporary Tamil Nadu, the profile of religious orders is getting bigger by the day. From secluded institutions devoted to religious study, contemplation and meditation upon the absolute, to institutions of increasingly assertive public presence, religious orders present an interesting area of sociological study. The evolution has been a long and continuous process where the religious orders have exhibited a dynamic and vibrant character to adapt and reorient to the changing contexts. The study tries to understand this changing character of religious orders since the advent of colonialism in India. Specifically the study enquires into the role of religious orders in the construction of collective identities.

Identity construction projects involve reinterpretation of history and culture which denies the plurality and difference among the components it seeks to unite. It privileges certain symbols and practices over others, changing, accommodating and assimilating them in its efforts to construct monolithic blocs out of diverse elements. Tamil Nadu witnessed two such identity construction projects seeking to unite diverse elements along the axial poles of language, caste and religion. The study argues that such attempts would fail because they believe that identities are out there in nature and are fixed along those axial lines. The study tries to show that identities are fluid, malleable and their articulation depends upon history,
culture and context. Any attempt to leave one or the other of these factors fails to grapple the full complexity of the phenomenon.

In Tamil Nadu, the religious orders encountered two such attempts – the attempt of the Dravidian Movement to construct a collective identity based on language and caste and the more contemporaneous attempts of the Hindutva Movement to construct an identity based on religion – and the study tries to capture the complex historical, cultural and contextual choices which determine the response of religious orders to the endeavours of these two tendencies. Also, from the viewpoint of religious orders, my attempt has been to understand how they try to negotiate such situations to adapt and reorient themselves to the vast changes that have taken place in the socio-political milieu of Tamil society since colonialism.

Hailing from a temple town where the intricacies and local politics of temple and mutt are the very stuff of gossip and debate, the study, at a personal level, gives me an opportunity to contextualise them from the vantage point of Sociology. At another level my attempt has been to fill the gap that arises out of the almost exclusive domination of studies on temples in any sociological analysis of religious institutions in Tamil Nadu. Religious orders, one of the two great legacies of the Bhakti movement in Tamil speaking regions – when one penetrates the ceremonial and solemn atmosphere of a religious order – reveal themselves as dynamic and vibrant institutions, influenced by history and influencing history.
A note on translation and transliteration: Translations of all texts and interviews are my own. The transliteration are again my own and I have tried to exactly capture the pronunciations without the use of diacritic marks.

Throughout the conduct of this study, I have incurred a debt of gratitude which a few words would never be able to repay. Nevertheless, failure to mention some important names whose help has been overwhelming and thoughtful would be such an act of ingratitude from which I would never be absolved.

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While I have drawn upon the ideas and comments of many, I alone remain responsible for the arguments and errors.

R. Madhavan.
Location of Select Religious Orders in Tamil Nadu

Andhra Pradesh
Sriperumbudur
Kanchipuram
Kollam
Perur
Srirangam
Dharapuram
Thiruvaduthurai
Kundrakudi
Madurai
Nanguneri

Indian Ocean
Sri Lanka
Bay of Bengal
Lakshwadeep Sea
Karnataka
Kerala

Indian Ocean